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Port city of Mariupol comes under fire after Russia invades Ukraine

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By **Aleksandar Vasovic**

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[1/5] A Ukrainian rocket launcher vehicle drives west of the coastal city of Mariupol, after Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized a military operation in eastern Ukraine, in Mariupol, February 24,... Purchase Licensing Rights **Read more**

Summary

Mariupol is an important port near separatist areas

Residents fear Russian forces might try to seize it

Many shops are closed, some people flee

MARIUPOL, Ukraine, Feb 24 (Reuters) - A residential area of Mariupol in southeastern Ukraine was hit by shelling on Thursday as residents worried that Russian forces will try to take the strategic port city.

Local authorities said 26 people were being treated for wounds in hospital after an eastern district of Mariupol was shelled and "an attempt by Russian troops to break through" into the city was thwarted.

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A diplomatic source later told Reuters that the city outskirts had come under heavy fire and that hundreds of explosions had been heard.

Residents are on edge after Russia's invasion of Ukraine because Mariupol, a city of around half a million people, lies only about 10 km (six miles) from areas controlled by pro-Russian separatists. read more

Many shops did not open on Thursday and some people packed their belongings into cars to flee the city.

"We are going into hiding," said one middle-aged woman.

Another resident, 17-year-old Yulia, said via the messaging app Telegram: "We have a shelter in our house but I don't know whether it's big enough and whether it is that safe."

The separatists did not attack Mariupol when they seized swathes of eastern Ukraine in a conflict that began in 2014 even though it is an important port and home to steel mills.

But capturing it now would let Moscow link Russian-controlled Crimea over land to the separatist enclaves and secure complete control over the coast of the Azov Sea, increasing economic pressure on Ukraine's government.

Reuters correspondents in the area on Thursday saw plenty of signs that the Ukrainian army is preparing to defend Mariupol.

Ukrainian missile launchers could be seen beside roads. When a Ukrainian armoured column thundered along a road outside Mariupol, soldiers on tanks showed victory signs to passing cars which honked their horns in support.

Further along the road, in the towns of Mangush and Berdyansk by the Azov Sea, cars queued at petrol stations, and people stood in line at cash machines.

Ukraine's Azov Sea ports export wheat, barley and corn to Mediterranean importers including Cyprus, Egypt, Italy, Lebanon and Turkey, but an adviser to the Ukrainian president's chief of staff said the Ukrainian military suspended shipping at the country's ports after the invasion began. read more

Additonal reporting by Nataliaa Zinets in Kyiv and by Anton Zverev; writing by Timothy Heritage; Editing by Janet Lawrence, William Maclean

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